

Homily: Year B, 5 Epiphany
Text: Mark 1:29-39

A few years ago, in the journal First Things, Edward Oakes reported that on a pleasant summer day “a man was arrested in Germany for walking down the street wearing nothing except a cap, a wrist watch, and sneakers. After his arrest [all] he said in his defense [was], ‘I’m struggling for my recognition.’”

It’s a line that seems, at first, to be merely comical. But Oakes contended that it reveals something far more serious, more desperate than humorous. For in our current time we are all caught between two immense and contradictory assumptions about who we are as human beings. On the one hand, we insist that all persons are created equal, and, yet, on the other, we repeatedly claim that every individual is absolutely unique. Everyone is different, but none of the differences really hold. As soon as you find your voice, you’re told to join the chorus. There’s no still place to settle, and finding one’s self becomes a struggle.

This tension is perfectly exemplified in People magazine. It’s the most popular magazine in the country, and could there be a more generic title? One word: People, which includes you and me and anyone and everyone. It’s completely indiscriminate. It announces: “We are all equals.”

But, of course, we aren’t, and the magazine isn’t about anyone or everyone. It’s really about select someones: stars, celebrities. We could say special people, but all people are supposed to be special. What the magazine suggests, however, is that life is really lived when you become so special that, wherever you go, you’re immediately recognized, and, therefore, other people want to claim some attachment to your specialness for themselves. We are thus told, in page after page, where Jennifer Lopez had lunch, what books Oprah reads, whether Jessica Simpson qualifies as being fat, and how some of the recognized elite have, in these tough economic times, turned to wearing ragged and torn clothes, generating a new fashion: “recession chic.” And, knowing this, then, you can go out to lunch, book in hand, and wonder out loud whether you might be too heavy to look good in the latest, trendy outfits, culled from local donation bins. And all around you, others can be impressed, recognizing you, too, as someone – at least for the moment, until everyone else catches on and all the specialness is flattened, and some other, new form of recognition has to be conjured up. It’s an endless chore. Recognition is fickle, and ultimately, chasing it can leave us exhausted – or dare I say, naked, with little to say in response.

Part of what is at issue in the Gospel read this morning is recognition. While Jesus was in Capernaum, the people brought to him many who were ill and beset, many of whom he cured, which quickly made him famous. Word about him spread – and with this fame, the desire of others to get from him something of the same, something special transferred. Even the demons wanted to share in the excitement by openly declaring who, in fact, Jesus was. More than all others, they truly recognized him. Yet Jesus wanted no part in this commotion. He silenced the demons, and while it was still dark, early in the morning, he escaped the press of the people and sought out a deserted place where he could be alone to pray.

He had no interest in recognition. He refused it from the spirits. He avoided it from the people. He chose to live in a completely different direction. And here the text is subtle but clear. Jesus’

focus was not on his own uniqueness. His first passion was to discern the will of God. He left the noise of the crowd's adulation in order to pray in isolation. His second focus, when his disciples found him and told of all the people clamoring after him, was to leave the area and serve those in neighboring towns, where neither he nor his message were known.

In so doing, Jesus embodied the two great commandments. Even for God incarnate, the mission of life was not about him. Nothing pointed inward. Everything was directed outward, to God, to others. Jesus did not seek his own fame, no matter how deserved it might have been. Rather, he persisted in living in such a way that when others encountered him who they saw was God and a love that was ceaselessly expanding beyond the limits of his person. When eventually Jesus, too, was arrested, he offered no defense at all – only the testimony of his life, a testimony of such strength that even death could not destroy him. Love proved infinitely more resilient than recognition.

In the strange wisdom of our time, recognition is all the rage, even amid dismay and despair. We can see its audacity on Wall Street, its slyness in the halls of power, its pretension among celebrities, and its resultant hollowness in millions of persons who drift from boom to bust. And love is just a charity, an afterthought if something is left once all the bills are paid.

At the very core of our identity, the church's message radically contests this. We do not live unto ourselves. We do not die unto ourselves. Our life is hid with God in Christ, and our privilege is to offer ourselves to others. For perfect love casts out fear. Think of how different our world could be from this perspective – not naked, but glorious.

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen